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ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IMPLEMENTATION OF THE DECISIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa: implementation of resolution 50/112

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. By its resolution 47/188 of 22 December 1992, the General Assembly established an Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee for the Elaboration of an International Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa.

2. The General Assembly decided, by its resolution 49/234 of 23 December 1996, that the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee should continue to function in order (a) to prepare for the first session of the Conference of the Parties; (b) to facilitate implementation of the provisions of the Committee's resolution 5/1 on urgent action for Africa; (c) to initiate measures relating to the identification of the organization to house the global mechanism; (d) to elaborate the rules of procedure of the Conference of the Parties; and (e) to consider other relevant issues.

3. In resolution 50/112 of 20 December 1995, the General Assembly decided that the Committee should continue to prepare for the first session of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention. The Assembly requested the Secretary General to report to it, at its fifty-first session, on the implementation of the resolution.

4. The present report reviews recent developments and measures taken in implementation of resolution 50/112. It supplements the information already provided to the General Assembly at its fiftieth session in the reports of the Secretary-General (A/50/515 and A/50/516).

II. STATUS OF THE CONVENTION

5. As at 3 October 1996, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, which was adopted on 17 June 1994, had been signed by 115 States and ratified, accepted, approved or acceded to by 50 countries: Mexico, Cape Verde, Netherlands, Egypt, Senegal, Ecuador, Lesotho, Finland, Togo, Tunisia, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Peru, Sudan, Canada, Sweden, Denmark, Switzerland, Niger, Mauritius, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Spain, Federated States of Micronesia, Israel, Portugal, Panama, Lebanon, Algeria, Gambia, Malawi, Germany, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Oman, Bolivia, Mauritania, Eritrea, Benin, Norway, Mongolia, Central African Republic, Gabon, Botswana, Turkmenistan, Zambia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Haiti and Chad. The fiftieth such instrument was deposited 27 September 1996 and, pursuant to article 36, paragraph 1, of the Convention, the Convention will enter into force on 26 December 1996.

6. The first session of the Conference of the Parties will take place not later than one year after the entry into force of the Convention, namely by 25 December 1997. Members of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee decided at the ninth session to accept the offers of the Government of Italy to hold the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties and of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to provide services and facilities for the meeting, and decided to hold the first meeting of the Conference in Rome, at a time to be determined at a later date.

7. At the eighth and ninth sessions of the Committee, in February 1996 and September 1996, respectively, many other members indicated that they had initiated the internal process for ratification, acceptance, approval or accession and expected that it would be completed in the coming months.

III. IMPLEMENTATION OF GENERAL ASSEMBLY RESOLUTIONS

A. The eighth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

8. Pursuant to General Assembly resolution 49/234, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee adopted, at its sixth session, held in New York in January 1995, a resolution on the organization and programme of work for the interim period leading to the first session of the Conference of the Parties. The two working groups established to carry out the preparatory work continued to function at the eighth session.

9. Working Group I is responsible for (a) the initiation of measures relating to the identification of an organization to house the Global Mechanism to

promote actions leading to the mobilization and channelling of substantial financial resources, including its operational modalities; (b) recommendations on the designation by the Conference of the Parties of a Permanent Secretariat and arrangements for its functioning; (c) financial rules; and (d) programme and budget.

10. Working Group II is responsible for (a) the organization of scientific and technological cooperation, in particular the terms of reference of the Committee on Science and Technology, the establishment and maintenance of a roster of independent experts and the terms of reference and modalities of work of any ad hoc panels that the Conference of the Parties may decide to appoint; (b) the rules of procedure of the Conference of the Parties; (c) procedures on questions of implementation; (d) procedures for conciliation and arbitration; and (e) procedures for communication of information for the review of implementation of the Convention and its institutional arrangements.

11. The Committee decided that the following questions would be examined in plenary: the facilitation of the implementation of the resolution on urgent action for Africa through the exchange of information and the review of progress made thereon and the promotion of action in other regions and the agenda for the first meeting of the Conference of the Parties. The Committee requested the interim secretariat to prepare a draft programme and budget for the first financial period following the first Conference of the Parties, for consideration at the last session of the Committee prior to the first session of the Conference.

12. The Committee also reviewed reports on measures taken to implement the resolution on urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions.

B. The ninth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

13. At its ninth session, held in New York from 3 to 13 September 1996, the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee reviewed updated reports on measures taken to implement the resolution on urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions. The discussion demonstrated that all signatories were taking active steps to promote interim action as briefly described in paragraph 25 below. Many delegations expressed their satisfaction with the efforts of the interim secretariat to facilitate urgent action for Africa and interim action in other regions. Members of the Committee and international organizations were encouraged to provide supplementary information at future sessions of the Committee.

14. Members of the Committee had before them offers from the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Secretary-General of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) to provide overall administrative support and/or support services to the permanent secretariat and decided to consider the matter further at the tenth session. In addition, members heard offers from the Governments of Canada, Germany and Spain to host the permanent

secretariat in Montreal, Bonn and Murcia, respectively, and will also consider the matter further at the tenth session.

15. In addition to discussions in plenary, the two working groups continued an examination of the questions relating to the preparation for the first session of the Conference of the Parties. The atmosphere was constructive throughout the discussions and progress was made on all issues under review. Recommendations were made by the Committee for submission to the first session of the Conference of the Parties relating to the terms of reference of the Committee on Science and Technology, the establishment and maintenance of a roster of experts and appointment of ad hoc panels. A recommendation was also made for submission to the first Conference of the Parties on procedures for communication of information and review of implementation. The working groups will continue their work at the tenth session on the basis of documentation reflecting the outcome of discussions, as well as analysis and suggestions, to be prepared by the interim secretariat.

C. Participation in the work of the Committee

16. Participation by States in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee process remains high. A large majority of delegations included representatives from capitals. The participation of developing countries was facilitated by the contributions of Governments to the special voluntary fund set up for that purpose by the General Assembly in its resolution 47/188, paragraph 15. However, since their participation remains dependent on the availability of financial resources, there is a concern that, should replenishment of the voluntary fund be insufficient, many countries affected by desertification might not be adequately represented at future sessions of the Committee.

17. Participation in the Committee by institutions of the United Nations system, other international organizations and non-governmental organizations remained active and constructive. FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNDP, UNEP and WMO, in particular, continued to support the process actively by making financial or human resources available to the secretariat and/or by providing expertise and resources, both human and financial, in support of preparatory activities carried cut in a number of affected developing countries.

18. At its ninth session, the Committee accredited 31 non-governmental organizations, bringing the total of such organizations accredited to it to 363. Representatives of 50 non-governmental organizations participated in the ninth session. At the close of the plenary session, on 6 September, the non-governmental organization representatives presented a panel discussion on women and desertification highlighting some of the gender aspects covered in the Convention, in particular the constraints faced by women because of land tenure systems and limited access to credit. The panel discussion was informative and enriching. Overall the contribution from the non-governmental community was relevant and useful to the work of the Committee; however, it must be noted that the degree of participation from the non-governmental community is highly dependent on the availability of financial assistance.

IV. ARRANGEMENTS TO ENSURE THE SUCCESS OF THE OBSERVANCE BY THE UNITED NATIONS OF WORLD DAY TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION AND DROUGHT

A. Introduction

19. By its resolution 49/115, the General Assembly proclaimed 17 June World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought, to be observed beginning in 1995.

20. The resolution invited States to devote the World Day to promoting public awareness on international cooperation to combat desertification and the effects of drought and on the implementation of the Convention to Combat Desertification.

21. The resolution also invited the Secretary-General to make recommendations on ways and means by which the Secretariat could assist Member States, at their request, in organizing their national activities for the observance of the World Day, and to make the necessary arrangements to ensure the success of the observance of the World Day. His recommendations are contained in his report of 6 October 1995 (A/50/516).

22. On the occasion of World Day on 17 June 1996, the interim secretariat undertook, or supported, a variety of significant activities in Geneva, Mexico, New York and Nairobi. These activities were undertaken with the cooperation of specialized agencies, United Nations programmes and relevant intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. The aim was to promote and raise public awareness of the problem of desertification and to promote the implementation of the Convention.

23. The interim secretariat's main activities on World Day 1996 were as follows:

(a) Screening in Geneva of the film "Po di Sangui", made in Guinea-Bissau. Apart from its strong links to the issue of desertification, the film's cinematographic and artistic qualities made it a major success at the 1996 Cannes Film Festival;

(b) Participation with the Department of Public Information in producing a special CNN documentary on desertification in its series "UN in Action". It was aired on CNN World Report on the occasion of the World Day;

(c) Launching of the first issue of a Newsletter in English (Down to Earth) and in French (Cap sur Terre). This will be continued on a regular basis and directly complements the secretariat's information kit and simplified guide;

(d) Distribution of T-shirts printed in English, French and Spanish;

(e) Contact with and encouragement of journalists to cover the issue prior to, during and after 17 June. Various news agencies produced stories on desertification for the World Day and the Day itself was well covered.

24. Furthermore, many activities of a similar nature were organized by subregional organizations, Governments and non-governmental organizations at the subregional and national levels.

V. ACTIVITIES IN SUPPORT OF THE RESOLUTION ON URGENT MEASURES FOR AFRICA AND INTERIM ACTION IN OTHER REGIONS

25. Reports and discussions at the eighth and ninth sessions of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee demonstrated that all signatories to the Convention are taking active steps to promote action during the interim period, with the support of competent international organizations. Members of the Committee are particularly committed to implementing the resolution on urgent action for Africa and are taking measures accordingly. The discussions also demonstrated that concrete action is being taken in other regions, underlining the global dimension of desertification and the readiness of countries to initiate response measures.

VI. FUTURE WORK

A. Tenth session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee

26. The Committee decided in decision 9/5 that the tenth session should aim at finalizing all outstanding negotiating issues and that the negotiations of the two working groups should be concluded at that session. In the same decision, they authorized the Chairman of the Committee to organize such consultations in the period after the tenth session of the Committee as he deems necessary for the appropriate preparation of the first Conference of the Parties.

B. Maintenance of the interim arrangements to 31 December 1998

27. In its decision 9/4, the Committee recommended that the General Assembly maintain the arrangements within the current programme budget for the interim secretariat to support the Convention until 31 December 1998 and to maintain extrabudgetary funds.

C. Calendar for 1997-1998

28. In its resolution 50/112, the General Assembly decided to convene, as necessary, a further session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee in 1997 following its tenth session, the exact dates and venue to be determined at a later stage. In its decision 9/4, the Committee recommended to the Assembly that it include in the calendar of conferences and meetings for 1997-1998 the sessions of the Conference of the Parties and of any subsidiary bodies that the Conference may need to convene.